

# Why Solzhenitsyn Will Not Go Away

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By Joseph Epstein

For the least fair, but most penetrating, analysis of Russian character, one can do no better than to consult Joseph Conrad. The great novelist was a Russophobe. Little love is lost between Poles and Russians generally, but in Conrad's case there was added ground for animus: Russia orphaned him. Owing to the efforts of his father, a literary man-of-all-work, in behalf of Polish freedom, his family was exiled to Siberia in 1863. There, Conrad's mother became consumptive and died, and four years later his father died of the same illness; the novelist-to-be was then eleven.

Conrad's grievance was not quite in the class of an obsession, but it was there, ready for service when needed. Russia, he wrote in "Autocracy and War," a 1905 essay ostensibly about the Russo-Japanese war, was "this pitiful state of a country held by an evil spell," a "bottomless abyss that has swallowed up every hope of mercy, every aspiration toward personal dignity, toward freedom, toward knowledge, every ennobling desire of the heart, every whisper of conscience." Not even revolution could save it: "In whatever form of upheaval Autocratic Russia is to find her end, it can never be a revolution fruitful of moral consequences to mankind. It cannot be anything but an uprising of slaves." Of course that is just what the Russian Revolution of 1917 turned out to be—an uprising of slaves that enslaved the rest of the country, and most of Eastern Europe along with it, for more than 70 years.

For Conrad, Russia was another heart of darkness, this one in a cold climate. In *The Secret Agent*, it is the Russian embassy in London that puts the novel's central figure, Verloc, to the job of blowing up the Greenwich Observatory, which results in the killing of his own poor imbecile brother-in-law and sets in motion the book's nightmare logic. And in *Under Western Eyes*, not his most famous or even his most successful novel but among his most brilliant, the astounding human spectacle that is the Russian character became Conrad's true subject. According to the novel's *faux-naïf* narrator, an Englishman teaching English to foreigners in Geneva, Russian simplicity is "a terrible corroding simplicity in which mystic phrases clothe a naive and hopeless cynicism"; in Russia, it is all but impossible to "tell a scoundrel from an exceptionally able man." (One immediately thinks of Mikhail Gorbachev, or of Boris Yeltsin.)

When *Under Western Eyes* was published in 1911, Edward Garnett—husband of Constance Garnett, the great translator from Russian, and a friend and long-time supporter of Conrad—accused him of prejudice. Conrad shot back that Garnett was "so russianized . . . that you don't know the truth when you see it—unless it smells of cabbage soup when it at once secures your profound respect." And indeed there are certain Russian characters in *Under Western Eyes*—as it happens, all are women—whose general views Conrad derides and in one

instance despises, but whose seriousness, even heroism, he nonetheless freely grants. These characters are all able to live outside themselves, to give themselves to really quite hopeless causes, like the reduction of suffering in a merciless world or the recounting of truth in an undeserving one. Only Russia, one senses in reading this novel, is able to produce people ready to pit themselves against the world's great gray disregard and dark evil—only Russia, out of the depths of its barbarity, is able to produce moral giants.

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Joseph Conrad would not only have understood Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn but would, I believe, have been tempted to insert him into a novel. Solzhenitsyn has the scope, the depth, the moral grandeur that stimulated Conrad's imagination to its highest power. He is Conradian, too, in passing what, for Conrad, is the test of authenticity: the willingness to live one's ideas, to sacrifice for them, to make them indivisible with one's very being.

All the great Conradian heroes are isolates, men who have chosen either an occupation or a philosophy that carries with it the condition of apartness. No one could have felt lonelier than Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn during his more than twenty years as an underground writer in the Soviet Union—unless it was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn during his eighteen years living in a compound outside Cavendish, Vermont, after being expelled from the USSR. In both places, he worked at his self-imposed task of bringing down the Soviet Union—a task whose successful achievement would, I suspect, be beyond the imagining of Joseph Conrad or any other novelist or poet. Even the word “heroic” does not seem quite adequate to describe this accomplishment.

Born in 1918 near Rostov, Solzhenitsyn was arrested and sentenced in 1945 to eight years in a labor camp, presumably for making disparaging jokes about Stalin. After an early release—thanks to the Khrushchev reforms—he was diagnosed with a supposedly terminal cancer, which he conquered. In 1962, during a rare period of cultural thaw, he was allowed to publish, in the Soviet journal *Novy Mir*, his taboo-shattering account of the slave-labor camps, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Other works, including the novels *Cancer Ward* (English edition 1968) and *The First Circle* (also 1968), followed—but only in the West. In the West, too, appeared *The Gulag Archipelago*, his monumental three-volume exposé of the Soviet slave-labor system which single-handedly destroyed what remained of Western illusions about the great Communist experiment.

In 1970 Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize, but was refused permission to travel to Stockholm to receive it. Always in a relationship of the greatest strain with Soviet leaders, always a thorn in their sides—“This hooligan Solzhenitsyn is out of control,” Leonid Brezhnev once said of him—in 1974 he was finally sent into exile.

Fortunate to have survived the war, the slave-labor camp, cancer, and many skirmishes with the KGB, Solzhenitsyn had come to think of himself as God's vessel. In *Invisible Allies*<sup>1</sup> a book written in 1975 but only recently published, and dedicated to the small army of anonymous Russians who helped him during his years as an underground writer, he has this to say about *The Gulag Archipelago*: "It seemed as if it was no longer I who was writing; rather, I was swept along, my hand was being moved by an outside force, and I was only the firing pin attached to a spring." And in *The Oak and the Calf* (English translation 1980), an account of his battles with the Soviet cultural bureaucracy, he writes: "I had learned in my years of imprisonment to sense that guiding hand, to glimpse that bright meaning beyond and above my self and my wishes."

If God was guiding his hand, the mission on which Solzhenitsyn had embarked, at divine bidding, was to bear witness on behalf of his fellow *zeks*, as he refers to the countless prisoners in the Soviet gulag. In *Invisible Allies* and *The Oak and the Calf* he speaks of carrying "the dying wishes of millions whose last whisper, last moan, had been cut short on some hut floor in some prison camp." And again: "My point of departure [was] that I did not belong to myself alone, that my literary destiny was not just my own, but that of millions who had not lived to scrawl or gasp or croak the truth about their lot as jailbirds."

Having been a *zek* himself, Solzhenitsyn identified completely with his fellow prisoners. One sometimes gets the feeling in reading Solzhenitsyn that, in the terrible morality of Stalinist totalitarianism, to have been a *zek* was a mark of the highest distinction, while not to have been a *zek* was to have been on the one hand wondrously lucky, but on the other hand in some sense spiritually deficient. Nadezhda Vasilyevna Bukharina, a woman who helped Solzhenitsyn in storing, reproducing, and smuggling his manuscripts out of the Soviet Union, once told him: "Before I die I have to make up for the fact that I never saw the inside of the camps."

For Solzhenitsyn, the *zeks* were Russia's saving remnant, and he was their voice. But he also viewed himself as speaking for something else: the entire tradition of Russian literature. Not *Soviet* literature—that was permanently in thrall to ideology, to supporting the state, the party, the full grotesque apparatus of Communism. By contrast, Russian literature, represented by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Pasternak, and others, was in thrall to nothing but its own freedom of spirit, hostage only to the truth of human complexity. This was a distinction that Solzhenitsyn insisted upon during his days as an underground writer. Of his falling out with Aleksandr Tvardovsky, the editor of *Novy Mir*, he writes: "The Soviet editor and the Russian prose writer could no longer march side by side because his literature and mine had sharply and irrevocably diverged."

These, then, were the twin poles of his mission—to give voice to the *zeks*, and to reclaim the heritage of Russian literature. In *The Oak and the Calf*, at one of many points when he recalls thinking the game might be up for him, Solzhenitsyn writes: “Why must this work be brought to nothing? It was not just that it was my work; it was almost the only work that had survived as a monument to the truth.” Whether or not it was “just” his work, Solzhenitsyn certainly felt that the fate of the truth, and perhaps even of Russia itself, was all on his shoulders. Anyone coming after him would find it “still harder to dig out the truth, while those who had lived earlier had either not survived or had not preserved what they had written.”

Was he correct, or did he overdramatize? On the merely mechanical level, what Solzhenitsyn achieved—the writing of his books under the most difficult of conditions—is astounding. While, in effect, in hiding, he produced before his fiftieth year an entire *oeuvre* of stories, novels, poems, a history, memoirs, and a vast historical novel (later to be completed in the United States). In a minuscule handwriting, leaving no margins lest he waste precious paper, he scribbled away at a fantastic clip. In *Invisible Allies* he describes his daily regimen while working on *The Gulag Archipelago*: he would rise at 1:00 A.M. and work through till 9:00 A.M., then start on a second day’s portion of work, quitting for dinner at 6:00 P.M., sleeping from 7:00 P.M. till 1:00 A.M., and then begin again.

All this was done while awaiting a knock on the door from the KGB. His manuscripts had to be kept hidden not only from the regime but from his own first wife, whose trustworthiness had been forfeited, and he sometimes slept with a pitchfork beside his bed. Yet he continued, relentlessly, to work, without the aid of editors or publishers and without any certainty that the typed and retyped copies of his books which made their uncertain transmission through the underground railroad of *samizdat* would ever see the light of day.

As for the substance of his achievement, even though all sorts of people have scratched about for reasons to deny it, the plain fact is that “in terms of the effect he has had on history,” as the journalist David Remnick put it recently in the *New Yorker*, Solzhenitsyn is “the dominant writer of this century.” He has been something writers often wish to be but rarely are—what he called in *The First Circle* a “second government.” One man alone, without aid of weapons, a party, or even a movement behind him, took on the most systematically brutal regime the modern world has known and, without even benefit of support in the realm of public opinion, brought it to its knees.

Given the astonishing clip at which he worked in his underground years, it is not surprising that Solzhenitsyn, in *The Oak and the Calf*, laments about the cost this exacted from him as a writer: “I never had time to look for the precise, the definitive word.” True, living underground, he had absolute freedom, with neither an editor’s nor a government’s censorship to worry about. Yet in sheer literary terms there was an “inevitable drawback”:

When you have been writing for ten or twelve years in impenetrable solitude, you begin without realizing it to let yourself go, to indulge yourself, or simply to lose your eye for jarring invective, for bombast, for banal conventional joins where you should have found a firm fastening.

Because of the extraordinary conditions under which Solzhenitsyn's books were produced, it is difficult to enter standard literary judgments about them. Norman Podhoretz, for example, has declared that Solzhenitsyn's two major non-fiction works, *The Gulag Archipelago* and *The Oak and the Calf*, are "among the very greatest books of the age." But for him the novels and stories, though some are better than others, are finally stillborn: "Despite everything that is right about them, they always fail to live."<sup>2</sup>

This is a more stringent view of Solzhenitsyn's fiction than the orthodox one, which continues to rank *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* highly and regards both *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward* as important works in the realist tradition. What is undeniable about them, however, is that they reflect Solzhenitsyn's own constricted view of what literature is for. He has attempted to write Tolstoyan novels, but to do so under the moralizing code adopted by Tolstoy at a time when the latter's own best fiction was long behind him and he had all but disowned it. "You ought not to approach literature without a moral responsibility for every word you write," Solzhenitsyn told David Remnick, who adds that Solzhenitsyn "cannot abide experimentalism for its own sake, or pure pleasure as a literary end."

Every work of Solzhenitsyn's has a point, and the point is always political, from *Ivan Denisovich*, which set out to expose the brute fact of the slave-labor camps, to his attempt to tell the true history of the Russian Revolution in *August 1914* and the subsequent volumes of *The Red Wheel* (completed but not yet fully available in English translation). These works resist judgment on purely or even on largely aesthetic grounds. One would almost do better to judge them by how well they make their points—which is to say, by the degree to which they have fulfilled Solzhenitsyn's mission.

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That mission is even larger than one might have thought. Helping to destroy Communism, it turns out, was only part of it. As Solzhenitsyn writes in *Invisible Allies*:

Beyond the immediate struggle with the Communist state loomed a greater challenge still: the Russian spirit lay comatose, as if crushed beneath a mighty rock, and this vast tombstone . . . must somehow be raised, overturned, and sent crashing downhill.

Here we enter the complicated—one might say Conradian—terrain of Russian mysticism. By mysticism I mean the notion, held by Solzhenitsyn, that in the Russian spirit lie secrets, and, just possibly, a remedy for the spiritual vacuity of the West. "I put no hopes in the West—

indeed no Russian ever should,” Solzhenitsyn writes in *Invisible Allies*. “If the 20th century has any lesson for mankind, it is we who will teach the West, not the West us. Excessive ease and prosperity have weakened their will and their reason.”

This notion of the West as distinctly not the solution, but as part of the same problem of modernity that brought about the hideous excrescence of Communism, has deep roots in Russia’s Slavophile past. But it also has roots in Solzhenitsyn’s own intense distrust of Western leftists, who stood by for decades while Russians suffered. Throughout his books, he takes shots at “useful idiots” (Lenin’s term)—“the anti-fascists and the existentialists, the pacifists, the hearts that bled for Africa [but] had nothing to say about the destruction of our culture, about the destruction of our nation.” When Jean-Paul Sartre wished to meet with him, Solzhenitsyn felt honor-bound to refuse this particularly egregious “useful idiot.” At one point in 1972, when the Soviet leaders were making it especially hot for him, Solzhenitsyn thought to stage interviews in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*; but their respective Moscow correspondents, Hedrick Smith and Robert Kaiser, appalled him with the triviality of their questions.

Solzhenitsyn has never been a public-relations man’s dream. “On one score I was adamant,” he writes in *Invisible Allies*, “fame would never win me over.” It never came close to doing so. When, an exile from his homeland, he arrived in the United States in 1975, Solzhenitsyn promptly told off Americans for their ignorance, their weakness, and worse. He accused us of collusion with tyranny: in pursuit of profit, American businessmen were selling the latest detection devices to the KGB to help imprison Soviet dissidents. He attacked our foreign policy: Soviet dissidents, he reported, “couldn’t understand the flabbiness of the truce concluded in Vietnam,” and the entire policy of détente showed nothing but a wholesale misunderstanding of Communism. As for our popular culture, it was beneath contempt. Americans, he declared, live behind a “wall of disastrous unawareness or nonchalant superiority.”

“Being an émigré is the most difficult skill to master,” remarked the Russian émigré Nikita Struve, head of a Russian-language press in Paris; it was a skill Solzhenitsyn showed no desire to learn. Attacks upon him now came not only from the Kremlin but from the West, including from anti-Communists and from his fellow émigrés. Disagreement soon merged into accusation: it was said of Solzhenitsyn that he wanted Russia to become a new Byzantium, that his favored form of government was theocracy, that he was an anti-Semite, and finally that he was nothing more than an ayatollah.

Solzhenitsyn soon decided that speechifying was not worth the energy and the emotional drain it exacted. In the eighteen years he spent in Vermont with his second wife and four sons, he worked on completing the various “knots” of *The Red Wheel*, and putting much of the rest of his enormous *oeuvre* in order. He predicted his own eventual return to Russia, and awaited the time when it would come about.

When it did, after the fall of the Soviet Union, things did not quite work out as he might have envisioned. Having fulfilled his literary duty, Solzhenitsyn now meant to fulfill his duty to society. His ambition, which had very little to do with power or politics in the normal sense, was to revive the Russian spirit, a task at least as hard to accomplish in post-Communist Russia as under the Communist regime, if not harder.

In *The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century*<sup>3</sup> Solzhenitsyn explains why that should be so. With an acidulousness of which Joseph Conrad himself might fundamentally approve, he surveys the many barbarities and betrayals of Russian history. He writes of Three Times of Troubles (the capital letters are his): the 17th century, when Russian despotism started in earnest; the year 1917, when the Bolsheviks sent the efforts toward reform that had begun under czarism crashing down; and today, when “we are creating a cruel, beastly, criminal society.” If Russian population growth is now falling, and male life expectancy is at roughly the same point as it is in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and certain countries of Africa, all this is owing to the despair of the Russian people, a despair Solzhenitsyn understands better than anyone on earth.

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What, to ask the question Chernyshevski asked more than a century ago, is to be done? For Solzhenitsyn, there is altogether too much talk in the new Russia about the economy; what such talk signifies to him is, after all, only a “new explosion of materialism, this time a ‘capitalist’ one,” and another dose of materialism will hardly do anything to save the Russian soul. Characteristically, his point of attack is moral. “We must build a moral Russia, or not at all. . . . We must preserve and nourish all the good seeds which miraculously have not been trampled down.” But in what soil are these seeds to take root? The character of the Russian people, “so well known to our forebears, so abundantly depicted by our writers and observed by thoughtful foreigners,” has been all but killed off by the Bolsheviks, who “scorched out compassion, the willingness to help others, the feeling of brotherhood.”

Solzhenitsyn’s reception in his homeland has been decidedly mixed, at best. Although, as David Remnick reports, a large number of Russians have told pollsters they would like Solzhenitsyn to be their president, elsewhere “a more ironical attitude . . . has formed. I found the attitude ranging from indifference to mockery.” Lots of people, one imagines, and not just in Russia, would prefer that he just go away. Even his American publisher has said that he does not anticipate a large sale for the next installment of *The Red Wheel*. “The interest is just not there anymore.”

Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn is nearly eighty years old, a prophet without honor in his own country. “I feel sorry for Russia,” says a character in *August 1914*. So does Solzhenitsyn, but neither his sorrow nor his patriotism has ever gotten in the way of his extravagant

idealism, or stopped him from telling his countrymen precisely what he thinks. He is, in short, a fanatic, but of the kind of which true prophets are made. Only Russia could produce such a man—and only Russians could ignore him. Joseph Conrad would have understood.

<sup>1</sup> Translated by Alexis Klimoff and Michael Nicholson. Counterpoint, 344 pp., \$29.50.

<sup>2</sup> “The Terrible Question of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn,” COMMENTARY, February 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Translated by Yermolai Solzhenitsyn. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 135 pp., \$15.00.